Was The Reddit X Link Ban Kickstarted By Coordinated Astroturfing?

or was it just the largest-scale NPC cascade in human history?

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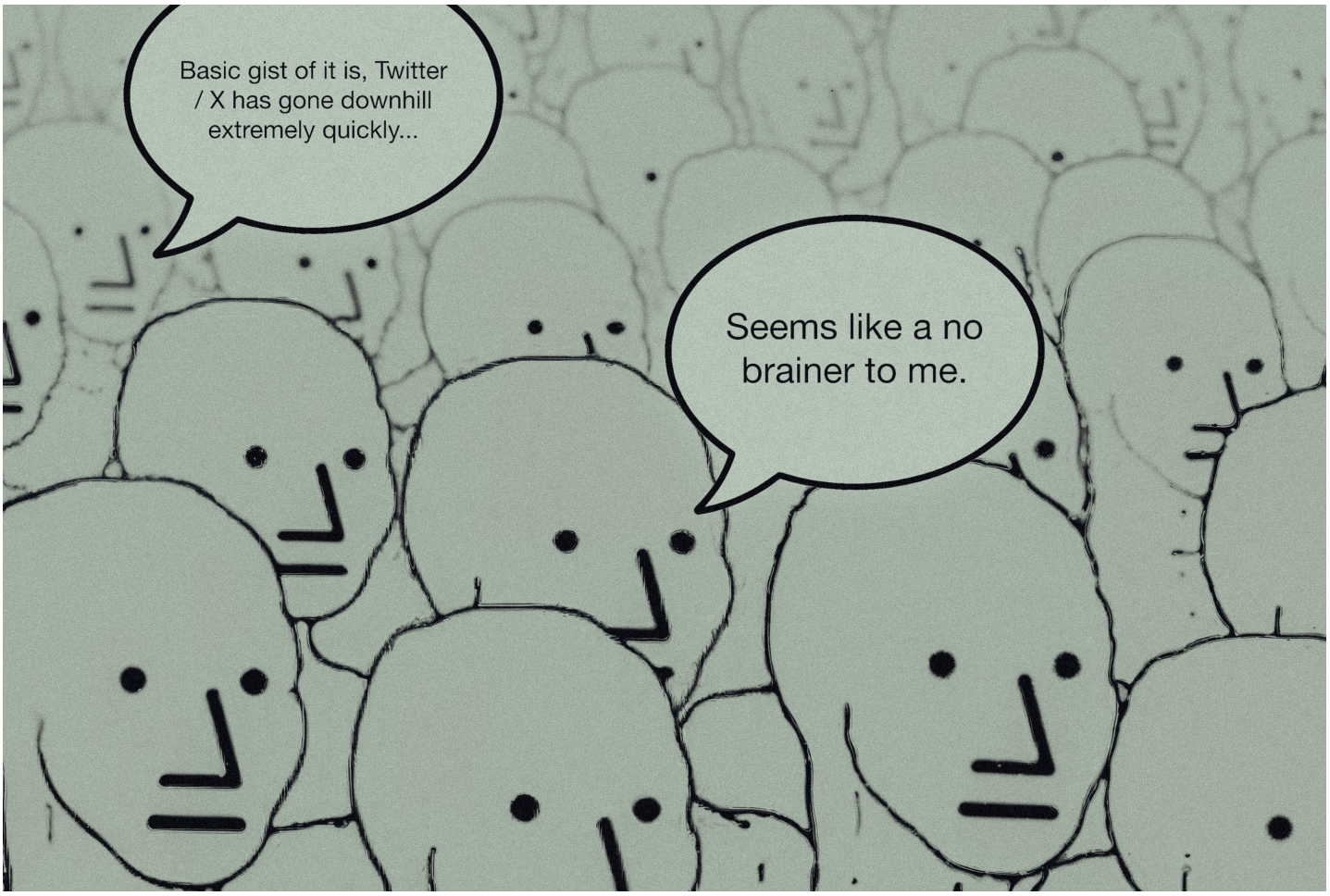
Apr 4, 2025



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On January 20, Donald Trump made history as one of two US presidents to be sworn in for a second, non-consecutive term. Elon Musk took to the podium at the Capitol One arena, where, after a few seconds of dancing, he put his hand to his heart and thrust his arm out in the air with a straight elbow and fi
pressed. He turned and repeated the act
crowd behind him.

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links to X. A disproportionately high number of the subreddits we viewed are dedicated to sports teams — particularly, early in the trend, UK Premier League football teams. Posts proposing the banning of X links in these subreddits often received more upvotes than posts celebrating major victories for those teams, like historic championship wins or the recruitment of once-in-a-generation star athletes to the team.

Stranger still, at least 35 of the posts had identical or nearly identical post titles, many of which were posted within minutes of each other. Over 20 of these posts shared extremely similar, and often identical, language in their post bodies.

"The only subreddits I really follow are r/soccer and r/Everton, and on r/Everton the Twitter link ban had an absurd number of upvotes (more than any other post I can remember)," said one Redditor we spoke to. "Anybody questioning this in the daily discussion was immediately downvoted to oblivion and had their comments hidden. I just remember thinking how strange it was that it had magnitudes more engagement than any post related to the actual club."

Given Reddit's scale (roughly 1.35m new posts per day in the first half of 2024, according to some estimates), and the nature of viral social dynamics, it's difficult to say with a high degree of conviction what drove the trend. A skim through our (comparatively small) dataset reveals a large number of what appear to be genuine, totally unsuspicious X link ban posts. For example, another Redditor we spoke to explained that they posted a proposal to ban X links out of frustration with having to log into Twitter to view links, and a genuine disgust reaction to Musk's gesture at the inauguration.

Could the X link ban proposal wave just be an instance of an extremely homogeneous platform tacking to the current thing in real time? Or were the social dynamics at play kickstarted by a third-party coor
Again, difficult to say — but that a patter
is unmistakable.

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on r/hockey at 4:10 am PST on Tuesday, January 21. In the following days, over 100 more subreddits would either propose to ban X links or carry through the proposal.

Though outlets like the New York Times and BBC cited r/hockey and other sports subreddits like r/NFL, r/NBA, and r/formula1 in their reporting on the trend, the reality is most of these communities were (relative to the speed of the unfolding trend) latecomers. Hours before the r/hockey proposal, at 1:51 am PST, Reddit user TedHughesGhost posted a ban proposal to r/avfc, a subreddit dedicated to the Aston Villa Football Club, a Premier League team in the UK. The title was "Proposal to ban X.com links and screengrabs."

Two hours later, another subreddit — this one also dedicated to a British Premier League football club — posted its own ban proposal. This time it was r/liverpoolfc, the subreddit for fans of the Liverpool Football Club. At 3:57 am, under the title "Proposal to ban X.com links," u/Yopeman wrote: "Seen this on a few other football club subreddits - seems like a no brainer to me, especially given the values of our club."

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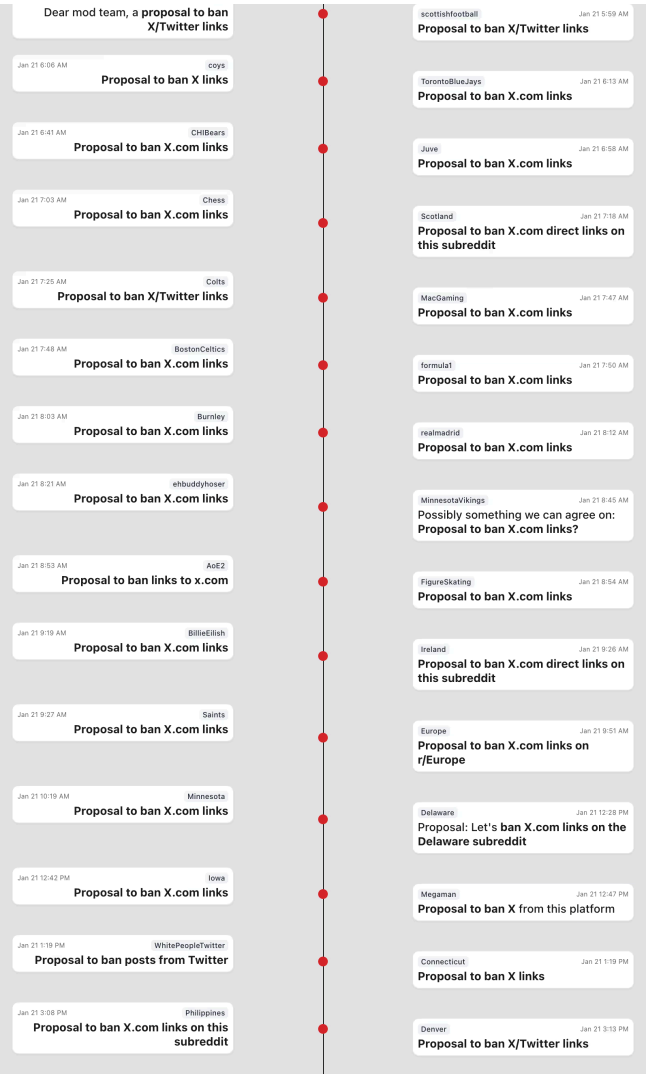

Timeline of ban proposals with similar titles

Both of these posts — the first that Pirate Wires was able to identify — went massively viral. In the Aston Villa FC subreddit (which, with 48,000 members, is a relatively small sports community), the X link ban proposal drew in 3,800 upvotes, making it not just the top post of the year, but of all time.

The response to the post in r/LiverpoolFC — which, with 592,000 members is a much bigger subreddit — dwarfed it. With 40,000 upvotes, it too became the subreddit's most popular post of all time. For context, the second most popular post of all time party" celebrating Liverpool's champion British premier league in 2020, its first such win in 30

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in r/hockey that Mashable had misidentified as the first in the sequence of posts. With 34,000 upvotes, the r/hockey post became the fifth most popular of this year — and the 17th most popular of all time. Of the top 20 (or 30 or 40 or 50 — you can pick a number) most popular r/hockey posts of all time, the X link ban proposal is the only one that has nothing to do with hockey.

After r/hockey came a cascade of sports subreddits posting various forms of X ban proposals. This included a post in r/SquaredCircle, a pro wrestling subreddit, on January 21 at 4:23 am, which cross-posted the r/liverpoolfc post. Fifteen minutes before, at 4:08 am, the user who had posted the ban proposal on r/SquaredCircle had commented on the Liverpool post, just 11 minutes after it had gone live, writing "1000%." At the same exact time, (4:08 am), another crosspost of the r/liverpoolfc post hit, this time in r/AFCBournemouth, another Premier League football team.

At 4:38 am, an X link ban post was published in r/BlueskySocial, the subreddit dedicated to the Bluesky social network, with the title, "Proposal to ban Twitter/X links." The body of the post read only, "For obvious reasons." The post, by u/MrInternetInventor, seems to be that user's very first, and got 5,100 upvotes.

At 4:41 am, a user crossposted r/liverpoolfc's ban proposal in r/chelseafc, a subreddit for fans of the Chelsea Football Club. That post got 9,000 upvotes, making it the top post of the year and the third most popular of all time, outpacing dozens of posts celebrating major league and game victories by the team.

At 5:18 am, a post in r/reddevils, a subreddit for fans of Manchester United proposed banning X links with a post titled, "Proposal to ban X.com links." The post, later removed by moderators, got 29,000 upvotes, making it tied for the top post of all time r welcoming the world's most famous ath Ronaldo, "home" to Manchester United when he rejoined the team four years ago.

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including verbatim phrasing, in the post body. A template-like structure emerges as posts open with, "Seen this on...", followed by, "seems like a no brainer", and capped off with, "given the values of our club/team."

r/liverpoolfc: "Seen this on a few other football club subreddits - seems like a no brainer to me, especially given the values of our club."

r/squaredCircle: "Seen this on the Liverpool FC Subreddit... with the rules and values of this subreddit, I think it would be something appropriate."

r/Juve (Juventus team): "Seen this on multiple other sports team subreddits - seems like a no brainer to me, especially given the values of our sub as a whole."

Even the user who posted the ban proposal on the subreddit for the New Orleans Saints, an NFL team on a different continent, employed this structure: "I've seen this on multiple other sports team subre
like a sensible move to me, especially giv
of our team."

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Seen this on a few other football club subreddits - seems like a no brainer to me, especially given the values of our club.

r/Saints • 2 mo. ago
lazzzym Drew Brees

Proposal to ban X.com links

I've seen this on multiple other sports team subreddits... seems like a sensible move to me, especially given the values of our team.

r/SquaredCircle • 2 mo. ago
Quinny1024

Proposal to ban X.com links

Mod Response Attached

Seen this on the Liverpool FC Subreddit and some other football subreddits have taken it on board, with the rules and values of this subreddit, I think it would be something appropriate.

r/EhBuddyHoser • 2 mo. ago
711straw

Proposal to ban X.com links

the true north strong and free

Seems like a no brainer to me. Do we want constant Fascist propaganda touching our shores?

r/Juve • 2 mo. ago
BaconEggsNCheese_

Proposal to ban X.com links

Discussion

Seen this on multiple other sports team subreddits - seems like a no brainer to me, especially given the values of our sub as a whole.

r/Burnley • 2 mo. ago
MFingAmpharos Up the shagging Clarets

Proposal to ban x.com links

Seen this on a few other football club subreddits. I refuse to use that cesspit any longer.

r/steelers • 2 mo. ago
Samwise777 MOD 8-6 Hines Ward

Effective today, we are banning Twitter links. In the interest of discussion and news, you may post screenshots instead.

Subreddit News

Seeking to avoid too much drama here, but please feel free to direct any ire or disagreements to me. I'm happy to discuss and try and explain the reasoning further.

Basic gist of it is, Twitter / X has gone downhill extremely quickly, and the "discussion" aspects of the site have been ruined by needing an account to participate and paid accounts having their comments artificially pushed to the top of the discussion.

News is still important, which is why we will still allow screenshots of the posts.

My deepest apologies to anyone who feels censored this decision. Please feel free to DM me and we can alleviate concerns.

The goal here is not to limit any type of Steelers content or discussion.

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the "discussion" aspects of the site have been ruined by needing an account to participate and paid accounts having their comments artificially pushed to the top of the discussion. As well as the actions of the Twitter ceo are not ok.

r/FigureSkating • 2 mo. ago
Defiant_Piece7442

Proposal to ban x.com links

General Discussion

I've seen a multitude of other much larger sports subs on Reddit taking the step to ban x/twitter links in light of the full mask off nazi saluting having occurred. If you search the title of my post on larger Reddit you can see for yourself the breadth of communities making this move. I didn't see any discussion here on the matter yet so I thought I would bring it up.

I propose we make it a new rule - no x/twitter links. Musk gets money every time they are clicked. If you want to show Twitter content just take a screenshot.

r/formula1 • 2 mo. ago
lauraslaw

Proposal to ban X.com links

Discussion

I've seen this doing the rounds on a number of other sports related subreddits today, and I'd like to think the values of most F1 fans generally oppose those of the person running that platform

Even changes such as only allowing Twitter/X screenshots rather than sharing direct links, this would at least reduce the traffic going to the site.

r/bengals • 2 mo. ago
LOP5131

Petition to ban x links?

I've seen a lot of major sports subs jumping on the wagon of banning x links from being posted on their sub.

I know a lot of breaking NFL news comes from there, however some things are more important than having sports news 5 minutes earlier than other sources.

Feel free to shut me down, just thought I'd pitch it out there.

r/Iowa • 2 mo. ago
Clear-Opposite1598

Proposal to ban X.com Links

Discussion/ Op-ed

This is going around on many football subreddits and now state subreddits. It looks likely to go into effect. I believe that the negative effects of this would be to just grab screenshots. Positives would be all content stays within the App/browser instead of bouncing out.

See: https://www.reddit.com/search/?q=proposal+to+ban+x

r/chess • 2 mo. ago
forceghost187 Resigns

Proposal to ban x.com links

META

This is going around on many football subreddits. It l
into effect. I believe that the negative effects of this w
temporary because the chess community will eventually see the value of moving to alternatives like bluesky

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Given everything that's happened in the past few days, particularly involving the Nazi behaviour from the owner context, we are considering blocking links to The Site Formerly Known As Twitter. We would still be allowing image posts of Tweets, in the event major news is announced nowhere else, so you can still share those either way.

What do you guys think? Is this something worth pursuing? We considered running a poll, but feel that soliciting feedback is less vulnerable to manipulation.

Please note, due to historical brigading this thread will be set to High Crowd Control - Non-community members, new Reddit accounts, and members with significantly negative subreddit karma will not be able to interact freely. Apologies for the inconvenience.

r/bostonceltics · 2 mo. ago
PhoenixUNI KG

Proposal to ban X.com links

Discussion

Given everything happening right now, and seeing other sports subs going the same, I'd like to make this proposal.

EDIT: Apropos of nothing, r/nba just banned them

r/Scotland · 2 mo. ago
charlietoday tory cunt

Proposal to ban X.com direct links on this subreddit.

I'm sure most of the people of r/scotland will agree with me. I propose we make it a new rule - no x/twitter links. Musk gets money every time they are clicked. If you want to show Twitter content just take a screenshot.

r/FigureSkating · 2 mo. ago
Defiant_Piece7442

Proposal to ban x.com links

General Discussion

I've seen a multitude of other much larger sports subs on Reddit taking the step to ban x/twitter links in light of the full mask off nazi saluting having occurred. If you search the title of my post on larger Reddit you can see for yourself the breadth of communities making this move. I didn't see any discussion here on the matter yet so I thought I would bring it up.

I propose we make it a new rule - no x/twitter links. Musk gets money every time they are clicked. If you want to show Twitter content just take a screenshot.

As the ban proposals spread, the topics of the subreddits they were posted into became more diverse. There were numerous posts into subreddits focused on U.S. states (Minnesota, Delaware, Iowa, Connecticut, Hawaii, Texas and others), cities (Los Angeles, Austin, Denver, Seattle, and London, Ontario), countries (Ireland, Scotland, Finland, South Africa, France, Philippines), and some miscellaneous (FuckCars, Cybersecurity, Autism, Poirot, Imaginary Network, WhitePeopleTwitter, dinosaurs).

But, by far, the most prominent of the subreddits on which we saw the ban proposals were sports or game-related. The latter included r/boardgames (where the X ban post was the second-most-popula
time) and r/smashbros. In r/magictcg —
member subreddit dedicated to Magic: the Gathering

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(28,000 upvotes), r/bosthonceltics (14,000 upvotes), r/Mariners, and the subreddit for Age of Empires II, r/aoe2 (10,000 upvotes) all became those subreddits' top posts of all time. The X ban post on r/Mariners got 1,000 more upvotes than the second most popular of all time (posted four years ago) whose title reads: "THE MARINERS ARE GOING TO THE PLAYOFFS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 21 YEARS."

37 out of 105 X ban posts analyzed by Pirate Wires were locked by mods, preventing further commenting, in many cases mere hours after the posts were initially published. 26 posts were removed, either by mods or by the original poster (with some overlap between the locked and removed posts). Eight X ban proposal posts with hundreds of upvotes to upvotes in the low five figures were totally nuked — that is, OPs not only deleted their posts, but deleted their entire accounts.

It's possible all this was completely organic behavior. A very high fitness meme catches on in an environment — a social network with a left-leaning userbase — uniquely suited for its spread. Hosts with off-the-charts hatred for Musk are incentivized to replicate the meme because to do so is to show virtue, signal allegiance to the in-group, and tear someone down who they've been trained to hate. It's not out of the question.

According to a Reddit spokesperson, "Vote manipulation is strictly prohibited on Reddit, and we have automated systems in place to detect and action this behavior. We investigated and found no evidence of widespread voting irregularities or coordinated manipulation."

Still, any of the anomalies detailed above are pretty curious, especially in an information ecosystem where nothing is what it seems. And all the anomalies stacked — the all-time top posts, templated language, rapidity of the early posts, and, more than anything, the fact that the trend unfolded predominantly in sports subreddits — does seem to want some fu investigation.

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We'll continue pulling on threads. Stay tuned.

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Garrett Frey 15 hours ago

Not sure what it adds to the story, and I lack the screenshots to back it up, but I'm fairly certain that many subs also ignored the results of petition votes and banned X links. So the minority subs that were not subject to ballot stuffing still had a coordinated mod effort to silence X.

Like (2) Reply

James Schwartz 6 hours ago

I find it very hard to believe that NFL teams that this was posted on was its highest vote getters. Most NFL football fans don't virtue signal.

Like Reply

jabster 10 hours ago

The lesson is that you can be rich as hell, as long as you don't offend the Omnicause.

Like Reply

11 hours ago

They also used this opportunity to push Bluesky hard. This is an obvious astroturfing [illegible] and make it Bluesky seem more popu[illegible]

Like Reply (1)

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Omnicause move.

Compared to, say, X banning links to Substack, which looks more like a business/competition decision.

Like Reply

Michael Kelly 12 hours ago

I see the timing as suspicious. Football, (international football that is) is global. 3AM in California is I think 9AM tomorrow in Queensland. Football interested Redditors can be all over the board. Not so much with Hockey, which tends to be limited to North America and Russia. I don't see the average Hockey player/fan as being the kind of person who Reddits before work.

Not being at all familiar with the under-workings o…

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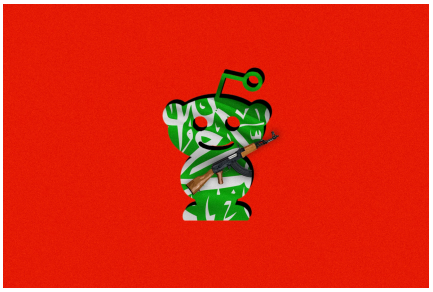

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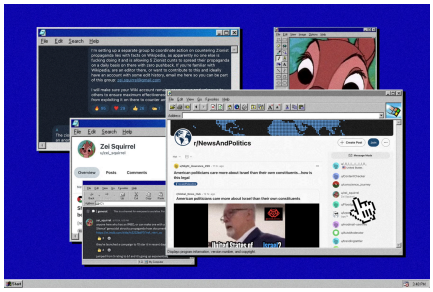

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